

Hurricane Hunters

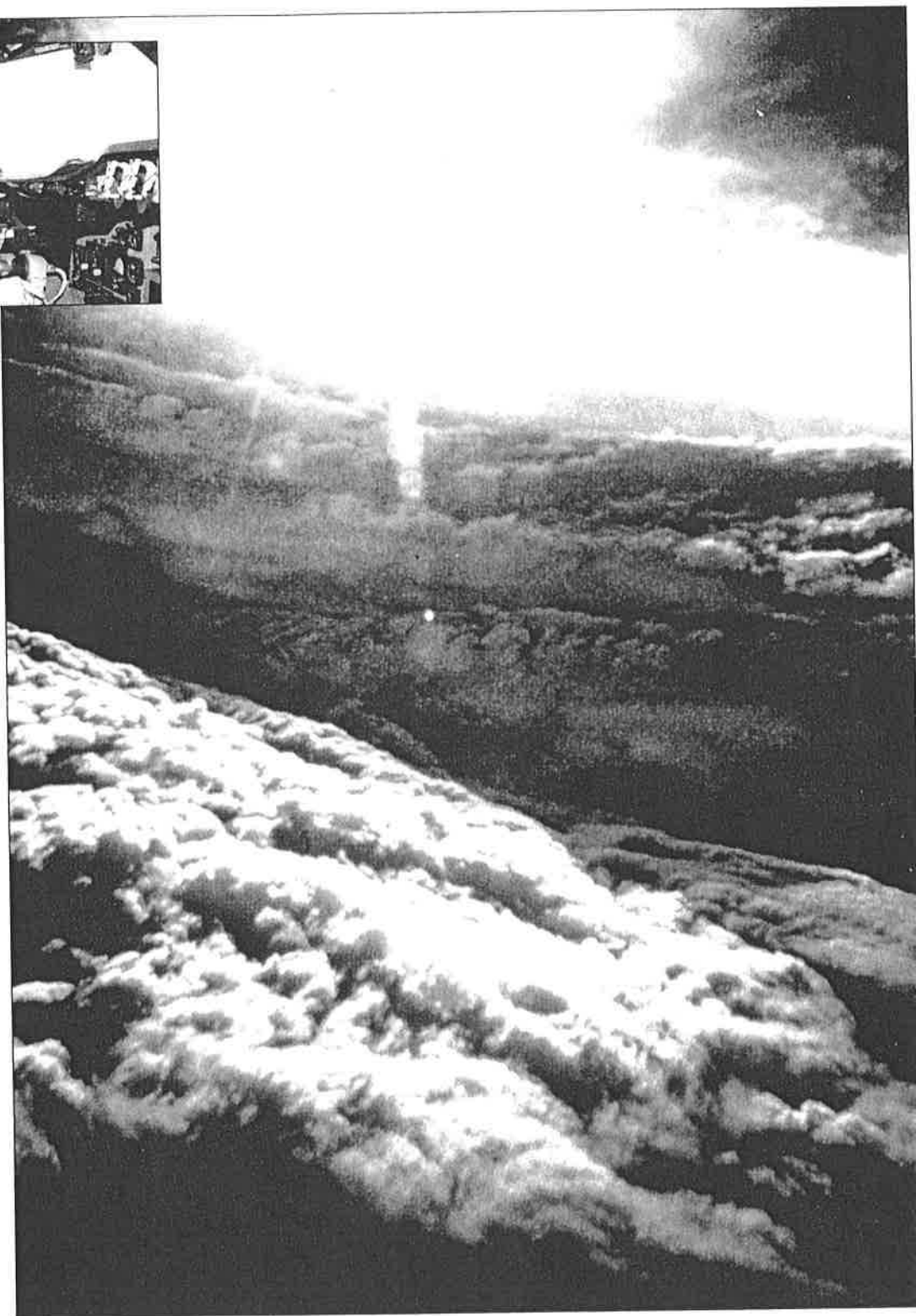
When weather forecasters have difficult decisions to make about hurricane evacuations, they can turn to a daring group of pilots known as hurricane hunters. These fliers stalk hurricanes in planes

filled with weather instruments. Their mission is to fly directly into the eye, measure the force of the hurricane, and send back valuable information to weather centers. On their bumpy ride, they pass through dark, swirling clouds where winds whirl at 90 or 100 mph.

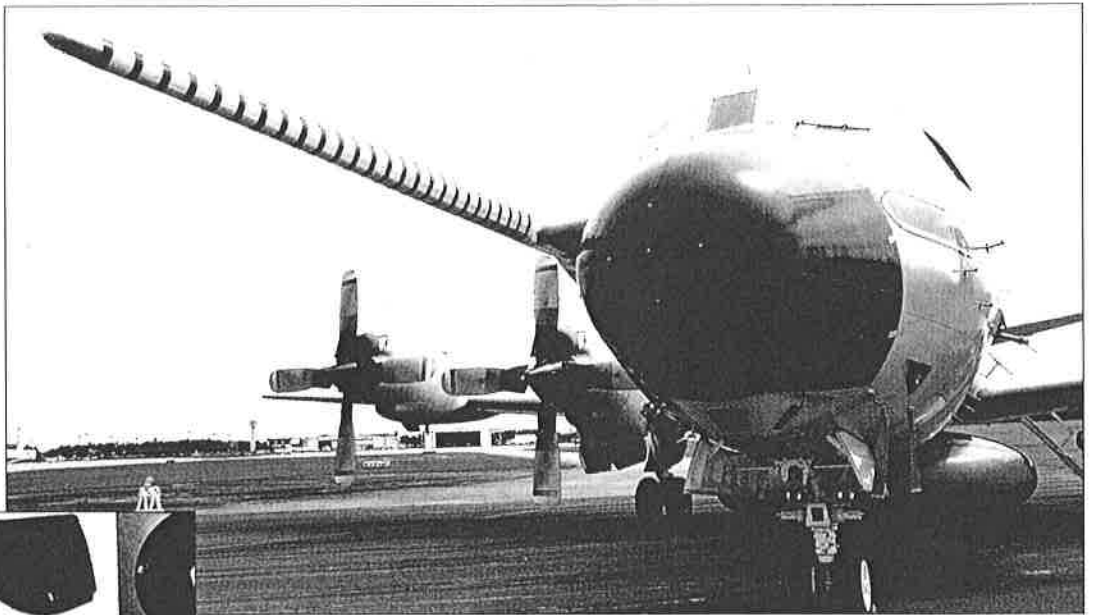


▲ **THIS HURRICANE** hunter is part of the Air Force Reserve. The official title of the group is the 53rd Weather Reconnaissance Squadron. These pilots may fly into a hurricane as many as ten times before the storm is over. An average mission lasts about 11 hours. Their planes carry special instruments for recording and analyzing storm data.

➤ **THE MOST DANGEROUS** part of the hurricane is the eyewall, the solid ring of thunderstorms surrounding the eye. Winds in the eyewall can reach 100 mph. Once through the eyewall, the plane is in the eye of the storm, where there is no wind at all.



➤ **ONCE THE PILOT** reaches the eye, information collection begins. This plane is nicknamed "Snoopy." Its pointed nose carries weather instruments that measure temperature and humidity.



◀ **THIS PLANE CARRIES** a small tube, called a dropsonde, containing weather instruments. It has a small parachute attached to it. The dropsonde is equipped with a radio transmitter. Workers or crew on the airplane

throw the dropsonde out of the plane in the exact center of the eye. As it falls toward the water, the dropsonde measures the air pressure, temperature, and humidity and radios the information back to the plane.



▲ **THE INFORMATION** is processed aboard the plane and sent by satellite to the National Hurricane Center in Miami, Florida. Forecasters use this information, especially the air

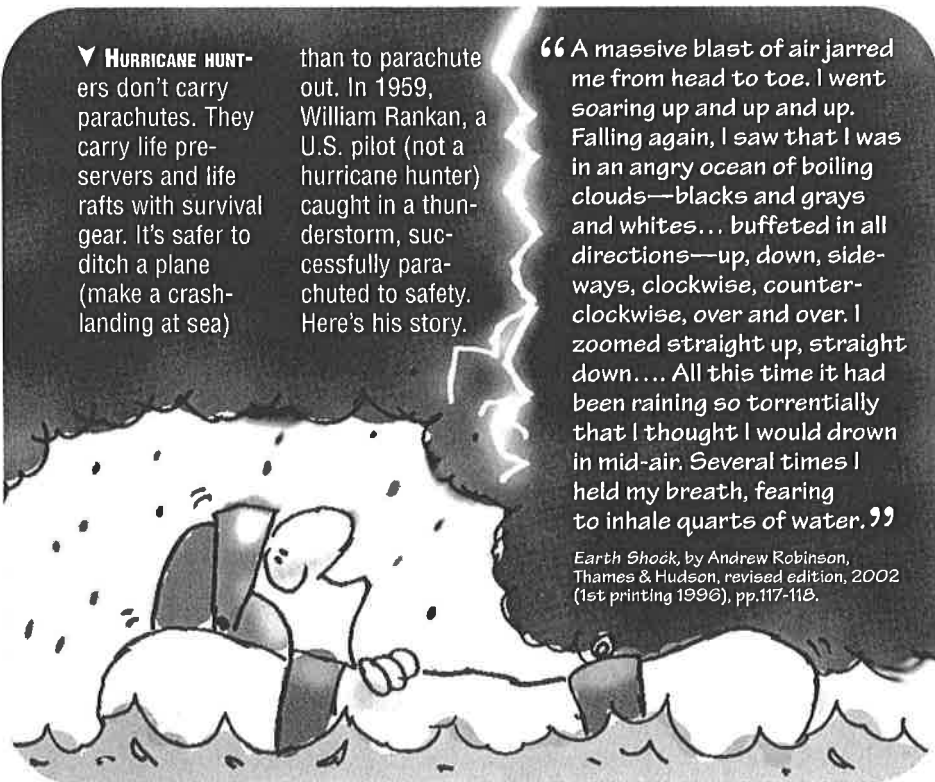
pressure data, to decide if a storm is getting stronger or weaker. Wind-speed data helps forecasters decide where a storm is going to make landfall.

▼ **HURRICANE HUNTERS** don't carry parachutes. They carry life preservers and life rafts with survival gear. It's safer to ditch a plane (make a crash-landing at sea)

than to parachute out. In 1959, William Rankin, a U.S. pilot (not a hurricane hunter) caught in a thunderstorm, successfully parachuted to safety. Here's his story.

"A massive blast of air jarred me from head to toe. I went soaring up and up and up. Falling again, I saw that I was in an angry ocean of boiling clouds—blacks and grays and whites... buffeted in all directions—up, down, sideways, clockwise, counter-clockwise, over and over. I zoomed straight up, straight down.... All this time it had been raining so torrentially that I thought I would drown in mid-air. Several times I held my breath, fearing to inhale quarts of water."

Earth Shock, by Andrew Robinson, Thames & Hudson, revised edition, 2002 (1st printing 1996), pp.117-118.



▲ **WANT TO BE A** hurricane watcher in the U.S.? Be on the alert from July to October. That is when waters are warm enough for hurricanes to occur in the western hemi-

sphere. Most form in the Atlantic Ocean, but hurricanes can start in the Caribbean or Gulf of Mexico over warm seas.